

Seeking Cultural Understanding Knowing Through the Art of the Picturebook as One of Five Modalities

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Caught in the maelstrom of scholarly debate about cross-cultural values, we seek some straws for our intellectual salvation. Groups of theoreticians and practitioners, like schools of fish roiling in the seas, create waves. Some groups, like those who supported the exhibition of Primitive and Modern artifacts at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, are historical revisionists seeking new values through the alleged "influences and affinities" they attempt to demonstrate. Others more mundanely offer youngsters cardboard and paint so they may produce their own Kachina dolls in order to come to grips with the fundamental values of an alien culture. Still others wish to alter the function of the art educator by changing his or her role from the tripartite producer/historian/critic to that of ethnographer. And some would use the study of artifacts as a means towards social unification. Nor would we leave out those who continue to speculate about the nature of art and its various categories and hierarchies. In seeking the means to ride these waves we have chosen a modest and possibly different approach to the problem of cross-cultural understanding.

We begin with a group of assumptions:

1) One can never fully understand the "other." One of the joys of life is the mystery inherent in individual differences. Neither marriage nor friendship nor the study of someone else will produce total disclosure.

2) People are fundamentally self-centered. We have fierce survival instincts and gravitate towards experiences which give us pleasure.

3) People are basically curious. We want to figure out a magic trick as well as to speculate about the nature of humankind.

4) People can find ways to satisfy that curiosity, i.e., to learn. We can do so microscopically (introspectively) by examining our own behavior as well as macroscopically by comparing ourselves with others.

We believe, further, that human life is energized through a system of interests. In part these interests cause us to make distinctions

among groups of people as well as between individuals. Interests, when examined, are based on values: economic, religious, social, political, aesthetic. Knowledge of interests and values of others provides us some means to understand their culture and to appreciate the differences among us.

Aesthetic interests and values are embodied in the arts of a culture. We focus here on the extent that art objects such as the picturebook, as a reflection of aesthetic values, may lead us to some special cultural understanding: an understanding not possible by means currently in vogue. We begin with the assumption that aesthetic interest fills a large part of daily life.¹ As a matter of course, everyone has aesthetic experiences and makes countless aesthetic decisions. These experiences and decisions are influenced by aesthetic values based in cultural conventions but they are also affected by a full range of other values: political, social, economic, and so

forth. To the degree that we can learn how the arts of a culture embody and reflect aesthetic and other values, we can draw upon them in education to teach for cultural understanding.

There are some who see the notion of aesthetic values as attached to what people "immediately or directly enjoy in simply looking at things in nature or at human-made objects," and that we engage in this looking because we like it, it's pleasant, we find it interesting.² But what is that power of the object to stir our aesthetic interest, and what causes the object to have aesthetic value? There are those who claim that some art objects possess more power than others to generate aesthetic interest.³ In addition, some people are "better fitted to grasp and respond to this power," and thus they are more able to value objects aesthetically than others.⁴ Supporting these perceptions, generally, is the notion that the power of the art object to create aesthetic interest lies in its formal, aesthetic merits, e.g. the degree to which the design of the object embodies imagination and is successfully expressive, by Western standards. Further, the extent to which persons are able to recognize these merits in an object will influence their aesthetic interest and response. Unfortunately, this mode of determining how objects may be aesthetically valued offers cultural understanding of the artworld of practice and criticism that disregards, in favor of formalism, a range of other cultural forces that affect the design, interest in, response to, and empathy through art objects. These forces influence what aesthetic value is placed on the objects and why they appear as they do.

To this latter point Clifford Geertz writes:

...it is perhaps only in the modern age in the West that

some people (still a minority, and destined, one suspects, to remain such) have managed to convince themselves that technical talk about art, however developed, is sufficient to a complete understanding of it; that the whole secret of aesthetic power is located in the formal relations among sounds, images, volumes, themes and gestures. Everyone else -- and I dare say, among most of us as well -- other sorts of talk, whose terms and conceptions derive from cultural concerns art may serve, or reflect, or challenge, or describe, but does not itself create, collects about it to connect its specific energies to the general dynamic of human behavior.⁵

Geertz emphasizes that the value of art is "never wholly intra-aesthetic, and indeed but rarely more than marginally so."⁶ He acknowledges the instrumental view which holds that works of art can be seen as "elaborate mechanisms for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values."⁷ He also recognizes the practice of viewing art as made up of signs that communicate ideas and beliefs of the society in which they are found. In addition, he acknowledges "the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force" and the universal qualities of art to actualize aesthetic response. But, he argues that our task is to place art (always a local matter) within "other modes of social activity"⁸ (our emphasis). When we do this we give art its cultural significance.

To explain, Geertz uses several examples, among them the Yoruba carver whose concern for line stems "from rather more than a detached pleasure in its intrinsic properties." Research by Robert Faris Thompson indicates that the Yoruba

associate line with civilization. "'Civilization' in Yoruba is ilaju: face with lined marks.... The same verb which opens Yoruba marks upon a face, opens roads, and boundaries in the forest...."⁹ According to Geertz, to study the art of line in that culture "is to explore a sensibility." The Yoruba "materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast out of line out into the world of objects," where we can look at it.¹⁰

This understanding would not proceed from a formalist, functionalist, or even instrumental view. To study Yoruba lines for their intrinsic properties, as celebrations of social structures, or as communication to forward useful doctrines or transmit beliefs would be insufficient, if not inappropriate. In this instance, the lines are part of a semiotic system of signs that are "ideationally connected" to that society.¹¹ The usefulness of Geertz's writing is two-fold: it provides a significant argument for semiotic inquiry that is localized within cultural ideation, and it acknowledges a range of systems used to study the meaning or value of art objects.

There are at least four means by which we seek understanding of a culture through its arts: 1) studying the intrinsic aesthetic value of art objects as seen through the eyes of the culture from which they come; 2) learning ways in which art objects define, sustain, or strengthen the society; 3) learning how art objects communicate to others based on signs indigenous to a culture; and 4) considering art objects as embodying a semiotic system that is connected to and a primary facet of the ideology of the society in which they are found.

There is little that is simple straightforward about these four means to understanding. While they each are discrete aspects, their potential lies in their combined or

collective application. For example, in Flash of the Spirit, Thompson shows us the complex task of seeking cultural understanding by tracing the influences of Vodun (Voodoo) Religion and Art of Haiti.¹² His findings show that, prior to slavery, tribes in several parts of Africa warred and conquered, assimilating others' beliefs and imagery into their own. When these people were brought as slaves from different areas of Africa to Haiti, further assimilation of imagery occurred, both among the slaves and with the Haitians. Also, Roman Catholicism and the attendant art brought to Haiti was a further influence on the signs and symbols of Haitian Vodun art. Thompson's research demonstrates that this art embodies specific and indigenous intrinsic properties, defines cultural beliefs, employs signs that communicate, and reflects a cultural system -- the current aesthetic manifestations rooted in generations of varied and disparate beliefs and practices.

The complex nature of seeking cultural understanding through art is given different consideration by Michael Owen Jones. The author of The Hand Made Object and Its Maker examines the chairmaking of Charley and his friends who live in the Ozark Mountains. Cultural understanding comes in part, he says, from answering questions of "how or why the two-in-one bookcase rocker, masterpiece of furniture was made, of why Charley revised some of his chairs a decade after they were built, of why Hascal wanted to make chairs but could not, or of why Aaron made flat arms on a dining chair."¹³ Jones believes that such understanding "cannot be attained by positing style periods and supposing that one object's features account for the traits of another object; it does not result from preparing a life history of an inanimate object and tracing the object's presumed

genealogy to a progenitor in some other place in the remote past; and it cannot be attained by assuming that people constitute a homogenous group living in a state of equilibrium and producing objects according to a cultural norm promoting social cohesion." He goes on to say that many models for seeking understanding suffer "from the tendency to reify human thought and expression, to make static that which is dynamic, to assume perpetuity rather than to admit temporality, to render uniform what is individualistic, and to systematize and order in an artificial and simplistic fashion that which is extremely complex, sometimes contradictory, and maybe even chaotic."¹⁴

Our ability to understand how Charley and his friends value these chairs, and why; how these objects define, sustain, strengthen their social system; and how signs embodied in the designs of the chairs communicate to that cultural group is greatly dependent on what we presume about people and recognize about the limits of our research.

Of the four means we have identified thus far to seek cultural understanding, perhaps the most elusive is the fourth. Efforts to learn how art objects embody a semiotic system that is connected to a society's ideology pose unique challenges. Research of semiotic systems found in television imagery and dialogue offers an explicit if narrow range of examples that attest to such challenges.¹⁵ Fiske and Hartley, in their book Reading Television, write that signs embodied in the imagery of television "mean what they do only through agreement between members of our culture."¹⁶ How the message of television is interpreted, then, would depend on the extent of this agreement. Some signs and symbols are found to have meaning cross-culturally, while others are not.

Learning patterns of association vary, and, as an outcome, signs that may come, for instance, in the form of television "zoom" or of color, and so forth, would have similar meaning across some cultural groups, but not others.¹⁷ Cultural inquiry of the aesthetic imagery of television, as well as the other arts of a society, would include questions like those from Arthur Asa Berger: "What are the important signifiers and what do they signify?"¹⁸

The complexity of the inquiry is evident. Fiske and Hartley reflect the concerns of Jones in reminding us: "We are dealing with dynamic aesthetic codes which are shaped primarily by convention or unstated agreement among users." Further, these "signs" can belong to more than one aesthetic code and so codes can overlap and interrelate in a network of signification.¹⁹ Seeking the relation of these and other signs and codes to the ideology of the society holds a tremendous challenge, when we realize, too, that within any society there will likely be several cultural groups. The applications of and response to these signs and codes may vary significantly depending on the aesthetic values or "tastes" of a group, further our efforts to connect art objects to social ideologies.

Seeking cultural understanding through art is clearly a complex venture. In this paper we have thus far addressed four means to such understanding. These offer a foundation for a range of didactic instruction in the art classroom. Yet, simplistic, even well intentioned attempts at such instruction may do more to damage than advance cultural understanding. Ralph Smith helps us find a rational basis as he differentiates among ways of approaching the artifacts of other cultures. He uses a model Walter Kaufman created when he analyzes

texts.²⁰ Boldly outlined he characterizes four fundamentally different ways of knowing:

- 1) The Exegetical: coming to another culture believing in advance that it has superior qualities compared to one's own.
- 2) The Dogmatic: the opposite, i.e. looking at the other group convinced that yours is superior.
- 3) The Agnostic: being as value-neutral as possible and, as a result, having no significant basis for reflection, or for making useful assessments.
- 4) The Dialectical: approaching the values of another culture "with a view to discovering what significance they might have for self-definition."²¹

Clearly the first two schemes serve purposes other than cultural understanding. And the third, the agnostic, although less blatantly offensive, lacks the structure and passion necessary for dealing significantly with the complexities of social groupings. The dialectical appeals to us because it recognizes the self-seeking nature of us all, an almost instinctive curiosity about the world. It also respects the evolving quality of the search as it moves from objects to the conditions of its genesis and its function within the various groups that constitute the culture as Geertz suggests.

We believe that the dialectical approach to the aesthetic experience of others can be and should be fostered in the young, not only because it is a humane basis for didactic instruction but because it can help to develop the imagination. Aesthetic experience is a form of psychic transport, a means to transcend mundane existence. In seeking a vehicle for youngsters that might carry them into alien cultures we quickly discarded the kind of isolated object that museums typically house in glass-covered

cases. Such vehicles move us at best to understand about the other culture. But there is another means of knowing, more mystical or poetic and less direct but a way that leads to knowing empathetically.

Thus, we offer a fifth means, empathy, to seeking cultural understanding through art. The picture-book is our example of this means. This publishing genre dominates the life of the child in its formative years and will, if thoughtfully conceived, continue to entice the youngster into adolescence and beyond, because we believe, as C.S. Lewis believes, that a children's story is probably the best art form for expressing an idea. It conveys both the conviction of wisdom and the conjuring of wonder.

Sendak 22, for example, can stimulate the flow of the imagination's gastric juices in the tale of a youngster's adventures with some Wild Things by creating a believable fantasy world and sailing Max to it over a dreamy sea. And Hyman can chill us with her depiction of the psychological decay of Snow White's stepmother through pictures alone 23, while Mayer's uses of pre-Raphaelite romanticism draws us into Beauty's emotional entanglements with the Beast.²⁴ If such artists can interpret fictional narratives in a way that makes us empathize with the characters in a particular make-believe setting, why can't the same artistic skills be used to give us a sense of some active but unknown other culture?

These art objects most often combine a narrative text with a sequence of narrative images utilizing all the techniques and principles of art that other art objects exploit. The words provide one kind of meaning, in a process in which we seek correspondence with certain life experiences. The pictures present more concrete symbols, supplementing and extending the overall meaning of the combined

narratives. The reader therefore can experience in a qualitative (aesthetic) way but with much greater understanding when only a single picture or statue, or worse, a picture of a statue, is made the object of inquiry. Using such devices as environmental settings, costumes, or graphic styles the creators of such books present the reader/looker with two kinds of information about some other place and/or time in a way that involves both mind and heart in an integrated experience à la John Dewey.

Clearly we're not proposing that reading (experiencing) a bunch of books will give the child an instant grasp of some unknown culture. Nothing will, not even if some "fact" books might suggest otherwise. Because we believe that becoming involved with others helps us better come to know ourselves, our culture, our arts, we are convinced of the opportunity picture-books offer art educators. Not all picturebooks by any means: many volumes purporting to have cultural content may take the reader down the road of ethnic stereotype.

Having exposed our convictions we must also exhibit our reservations because we are not trying to sell you a panacea. A book like Mayer's Everyone Knows What A Dragon Looks Like is indeed a Westernized pastiche of Oriental painting, and it may be accused of presenting a false idea of that art. Nevertheless it does capture many of the conventions of landscape and forms of costume and presents them in a manner that allows Western children to enter a foreign world.²⁵ Lubin's illustration for The Perfect Peach affects another Eastern style, one more directly influenced by the Japanese woodcuts of the 17th and 18th centuries.²⁶

A native Japanese artist, Maruki, has created a picturebook wrenched from her memories of the Hiroshima tragedy that more authentically visualizes the personal

horror of that day.²⁷ Traditional watercolor techniques have been modified, yet they carry with them the cultural lineage which makes the reader empathize with the artist's experience in a way not possible had the story unfolded in Mayer's or Lubin's fashion. She takes us from the peaceful family mealtime setting through the sudden explosive disintegration, the river red and body-choked and the vast grey devastation of the landscape. The final image, however, is a hopeful one as the people are shown, using the same reds of the bomb blast, making lanterns to commemorate the event.

By contrast, an Englishman, Briggs, reacts to the atomic timetable in a Western tradition.²⁸ More wordy, more cerebral, it depends for its impact on some knowledge of current circumstances derived from World War II. It uses color to show the change from the red heat of the blast of World War III to the final blackness of the inevitable deaths of the couple. As we respond to the pathos of the narrative, we also sense the cultural environment that has generated it.

Brown's Shadow tells a story of magic from sub-Saharan Africa in a way that respects the culture in its treatment of figure and landscape and evokes the spiritual forces that are significant to it through interpretations of dance and related artifacts.²⁹ By contrast, Haley captures another quality of that area: the humorous and more colorful approach to the folktales that so richly convey the wisdom of the group in more exaggerated images based on traditional architecture and costume.³⁰

In the Jafta series we are shown the boy in mundane scenes with his mother and father.³¹ The depiction of everyday routine, filtered through the artist's sensibilities, offers us the chance to sympathize with the current situation of blacks

in South Africa.

Children see the world from a different perspective than adults; they respond to experiences and absorb its sights and sounds. Their selections, their tastes if you will, are a function of these experiences. But we can account for their tastes, even more for their aesthetic growth, by helping them come to see themselves through the artistic products of others, whether as objects to learn about or as aesthetic narratives to become more empathetically involved with.

We have chosen to demonstrate the potential for such empathetic knowing through ten picturebooks. Clearly, however, we are not discounting the other modes of knowing. Perhaps it takes a Geertz to inform us what we intuit, that there's more to an artifact than its artistic qualities and that, in one way or another, we should seek out its significance within the culture of its generation and/or use. Depending upon our sensibilities and willingness to investigate more than the isolated objects of a place and time, there are a range of systems to be exploited for generating meaning or value. These systems, in summary, may be phrased as questions:

- 1) How do people of the culture value the artifacts?
- 2) In what ways do these objects support or strengthen the fundamental social needs or objectives?
- 3) How do the conventions of design and symbol act as a means of inter-cultural communication?
- 4) Why do certain artifacts form a semiotic system that exemplify

the basic ideology of a society? Answering these questions generally demands a frontal attack, a flurry of objective data-gathering and analysis in the manner of sociologists and anthropologists (ethnographers perhaps). Cleverness and diligence will provide considerable knowledge about another culture.

But even allegedly homogenous groups have divergent sub-groups ("value systems" to use Gans' term).³² And, to compound the problems of value systems within cultures, we recognize more each day the internationality of such systems. In other words, to seek significant cultural understanding, let alone such understanding through the arts, may be a futile, even fraudulent gesture. Yet, as art educators we bear the responsibility to help others enhance their natural curiosity and make more profound their quest for self-identity. And in calling your attention to a means, the dialectical (as yet untested) fifth modality for helping to fulfill that responsibility, we are not cynical. Engaging a picturebook is a real experience, not a vicarious event. The qualities inherent in that experience (gained through a transcendence from here to that other place) can make us more appreciative of the values of some others, can help us understand them a bit more. The knowledgeable and skillful artist ingests and interprets the qualities and creates a visual narrative of wisdom and wonder. The picturebook, as a form of children's literature, "is our link to the past and a path to the future. And in it we find ourselves."³³

Footnotes

¹ For this perspective and related concepts, see M. Rader and B. Jessup. Art & Human Values. (Prentice Hall, 1976), Ch. 1.

² Ibid., p.7.

- 3 cf. H. Broudy, R. Smith, among others.
- 4 M. Rader and B. Jessup, P.13.
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- 30 G. Haley, A Story A Story. (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
- 31 H. Lewin, Jafta and other books about Jafta. Illustrated by Lisa Kopper. (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 1983 and later).
- 32 H. Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p.68.
- 33 J. Cott, Pipers at the Gates of Dawn, xxii.

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